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ABSTRACT

An educator was encouraged to examine the community that sometimes, "almost magically," forms in classrooms. Particularly, she wanted to research what or who fosters such communal spaces for students and how educators might harness those forces to become more adept at community building. Her findings forced her to reevaluate her own concept of a communal classroom. Instead of the peace the educator had stipulated, she learned that true communities demand a "yin and yang" of harmony and chaos. Discussion in this paper is structured in the following way: Characteristics of Community; Ways to Build Community in the Classroom; and The Role of the Teacher in Community Building. The paper notes that Americans often downplay community and praise individualism. It states that M. Scott Peck (whose stages of community building are discussed in the paper) warns of the "fallacy of rugged individualism" which describes only partially what it means to be human. According to the paper, Peck points out that when people accept their interdependence, "in the very depths of our hearts...real community begins." Includes an excerpt from Walt Whitman. Cites 18 works consulted. (NKA)

Classrooms as "Places, Spaces" for Communion.

by Heidemarie Z. Weidner

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Classrooms as “Places, Spaces” for Communion

When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle together because you love one another?” What will you answer? “We all dwell together to make money from each other,” or, “This is a community”?

T. S. Eliot

John Lovas’s theme for this year’s conference—“We seek community in our classrooms”—encouraged me to examine the community that sometimes, almost magically, forms in our classes. In particular, I wanted to research what or who fosters such communal spaces for our students and how we might harness these forces to become more adept at community building. Interestingly, my findings forced me to re-evaluate my own concept of a communal classroom. Instead of the peace I had stipulated, I learned that true communities demand a yin and yang of harmony and chaos.

To share some of my findings with you, I will structure my talk as follows:

- Characteristics of Community
- Ways to Build Community in the Classroom
- The Role of the Teacher in Community Building

Characteristics of Community

I invite you to look at the dictionary definition of “community”—a group of people with a common bond—and then ask yourselves: what do the students in our first-year writing classes share with one another? Isn’t it rather an absence than a presence?

Separated from families and friends; separated from familiar places and comfortable language, many beginning students see college destroy rather than affirm their beliefs and values. If they “belong,” it is as English 101 students instead of individuals. Thus they appear not as members of a community but as agents of “underlife” whose irritating behavior disguises their plea for a space of acceptance.

Let’s begin with the role of place. Our classrooms often lack beauty and inspiration. Perhaps we might learn from our colleagues in grades K-12 who spent much time creating rooms that welcome students and provide a safe house for learning (Pratt 194). Lest we think that physical conditions are negligible, in describing the harmonious features of Green Gulch Farm and Zen Center, Stephanie Kaza argues that the very place where people meet has the “task ... to offer room for all beings to grow and flourish” (106).

But while the landscape—or class scape—forms an essential component of community building, it is the “practice of being together” (Kaza 106) that turns place into space where students may experience “a sense of belonging, closeness, love and support without the negative forces [they] might often find in [their families]” (Whitmyer 80). Such space is a quality that allows “individuals to develop their full potential” (Whitmyer 80).

Last but not least, real communities demand that their members are partners (Eisler 3). To create true classroom communities, partnership education has to replace the “dominator” model and transform our teaching practices. Riane Eisler, author of *Tomorrows Children*, says, “*What we learn and teach, ... how we learn and teach, and ... how we arrange and organize ourselves*” (2-3) are the crucial elements of a teaching-learning philosophy that integrates all participants (*AEPL Newsletter* 3).

Ways to Built Community in the Classroom

If place, space, and quality of being are crucial elements of community, how then can we transform our motley classrooms? While there is always an element of mystery—or an aspect of grace, if you will—I’d like to concentrate on two promising approaches to community building:

- By embracing life in its diversity, we can move our classrooms from pseudocommunity to true community.
- By creating a space of hospitality in which we cultivate listening and silence, we allow teachers and students to practice mindfulness and presence.

From Pseudocommunity to True Community: Embrace Life in Its Diversity, Sorrow, and

Joy

Consider the following scenario: Students are agreeable and pleasant at all times; they meet volatile questions with polite silence and skillfully avoid confrontations. Their teacher solves strife through organizational maneuvers. A colleague to whom I presented this picture wished that all of his classes could be like that.

Yet, according to psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, this particular classroom represents a pseudocommunity. Peck, who distinguishes four stages of community building, says that most so-called communities are anything but. Governed by good manners, they “make for a smoothly functioning group.” Unfortunately, instead of encouraging “the expression of individual differences,” they “crush individuality, intimacy, and honesty” (Peck 37-38).

It may be easier to challenge a group, which has met for the purpose of community building, than a group of students taking English 101. But challenge their clichés and generalizations we must if we truly care to enter the second stage of

community forming—chaos. Peck’s challenge to group members has parallels in our classrooms (38). A student’s statement, “Banning school prayer is a terrible thing,” might receive this comment from the teacher: “John, you are speaking in general terms. Allow me to use your phrasing as an example for the class. One of the strategies we need to practice for better communication is to use ‘I’ and ‘my’ statements. I wonder if you couldn’t reword your statement to ‘For me, banning school prayer is a terrible thing.’” Once John has rephrased his opinion, the teacher might continue, “Susan here might say that in her opinion, banning school prayer upholds the constitution.”

When teachers actively elicit differences, students begin to voice their disagreements openly. At the same time they are trying to convince others of the superiority of their agenda. Whereas people in a genuine community will listen to one another, they will merely reiterate their own position when stuck in chaos. As Peck says, “The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing” (39).

Although chaos is preferable to pseudocommunity (Peck 40), neither teacher nor students would want to stay mired in bickering. Organization and leadership provide a tempting but ultimately misguided way out of chaos for the use of power negates community. The better road to true community leads, according to Peck, “into and through emptiness” (40).

On a practical level, students learn to “empty themselves of barriers to communication” (Peck 40). These obstacles consist of “expectations and preconceptions, of prejudices ... and the need to convert, fix, ... or control” that have all but closed students’ minds to one another (41). An in-class period of silent reflection or an out-of-class assignment may further help students see what has kept them from true

communication during the chaos stage. For example, John might need to give up his dislike of those who are against prayer in schools while Susan might have to give up her unconditional faith in the constitution.

Opening up to one's group is a painful act, "a time of sacrifice," Peck writes (41, 42). It "hurts because it is a kind of death, the kind of death that is necessary for rebirth" (41). But in Peck's experience, all groups, working through the four stages, "have eventually succeeded ... have all made it through emptiness ... into community" where darkness and joy are equally embraced (42). If such community is to last, the cycle will have to be repeated. According to Peck, "the community will frequently fall back into chaos or even pseudocommunity in the process. Over and over again it will need to do the agonizing work of reemptying itself" (44).

A Space of Hospitality: Silence and Presence

We can greatly assist our efforts in creating true classroom communities by promoting a space for students and ourselves that allows silence and listening. In her book, *Radical Presence*, Mary Rose O'Reilly returns repeatedly to the stipulation, "to teach is to create a space" (Palmer qtd.1). Such a space, O'Reilly argues, "frame[s] the central questions of our discipline as spiritual questions" (2) rather than as issues of teaching techniques and business savvy. Such a space invokes hospitality and allows our students "to be [themselves] because [they are] received graciously" (O'Reilly 8). Speaking of practice, O'Reilly mentions getting to class early to greet students (8), practicing silence by writing at the beginning, middle, and end of a class, or allowing students to speak out of the silence that follows a question (O'Reilly 6). Only by practicing silence, only by truly listening to our students, O'Reilly says, will we learn

about our students' needs (2). Listening more, we judge less. Reaching out, we become more available and thus able to bridge the separation between our students and us (Dass and Gorman 90-91).

Out of this "focused attention" to students and the daily business of the classroom (O'Reilly 3) arise mindfulness and affirmation, practices that allow students to find their own and very diverse voices. Like Peck, O'Reilly welcomes the chaos such opening up brings forth. Warning that students' responses may "surprise us, amuse us, instruct us, [even] anger us, she writes, "In such circumstances, we will need that closing dialectic of speech and silence: it constitutes a liturgy of assimilation and forgiveness" (8).

The Role of the Teacher in Community Building: Empowering Students

Let me end this exploration of community building by examining the role of teacher. Just as teachers demand that students examine their hidden agendas, they, too, need to give up behaviors that impede effective communication. In particular, they must probe the power relationships at work in the classroom (Adair and Howell 175). For example, in order to avoid trouble, our students rarely say what they think (Adair and Howell 176), and the differing realities of thinking and action result in a dangerous game of winners and losers. But only by foregrounding our students' experiences, can we "create a common context for relationships and true community" (A/H 176-177). In particular, we need to break the silence that surrounds questions about power in the classroom (Adair and Howell 180). We need to ask, "Whose interests are being served?" Are we "moving away from domination and control" (A/H 180)?

But what might replace the paradigm of teacher as dominator? Robert K. Greenleaf's work as Director of Management Research at AT & T suggests a "new moral

principle,” the teacher as servant (56).). According to Greenleaf, the true qualities of such service would show themselves in those being served. “Do they,” Greenleaf asks, “become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants themselves?” (57) What Greenleaf says about the employees of a firm can be said about students as well: “Immature, stumbling, inept, lazy”—they can achieve great things “*if* [they are] wisely lead” (59).

Listening, acceptance, and empathy are crucial characteristics of the servant-leader. Greenleaf quotes a college president who said, “An educator may be rejected by his students and he must not object to this. But he may never, under any circumstances, regardless of what they do, reject a single student” (59). But acceptance of the person must not be mistaken for acceptance of shoddy work. Greenleaf warns, Always empathize, always accept the person, “but sometimes [refuse] some of the person’s effort or performance as good enough” (59).

Last Words about Community

As Americans we often downplay community and praise individualism. M. Scott Peck, whose stages of community building I discussed earlier, warns that the “fallacy of rugged individualism” describes only partially what it means to be human (12-13). According to Peck, we are called to wholeness, to power, to individualism. At the same time, we need to recognize our incompleteness, our weakness, and our interdependence. Herein lies the paradox of community. When we fail to acknowledge the two sides of the human coin—when we pretend that we can go it alone—we fail miserably at “genuine

community” (Peck 14). Only when we accept our interdependence, “in the very depths of our hearts, ... real community [becomes] possible” (Peck 15).

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is
enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is
enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breath-
ing, laughing,
flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my
arm ever so
Lightly round his or her neck for a moment,
what is this
then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

Walt Whitman

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